

JOURNEY TO HEALING: THE POETICS OF BODY, SPACE AND MEMORY IN TRANSLATION

A CASE STUDY OF RE/NAISSANCE & WITNESS, AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC PHYSICAL THEATRE PERFORMANCE

Théogène NIWENSHUTI

Stud. No.: 58 37 81

Abstract

This research, entitled *Journey to Healing: The poetics of Body, Space and Memory in translation*, is a case study of *Re/Naissance & Witness*, an autoethnographic physical theatre performance, attempted to interrogate the body in the process of translating the memory of survival and healing from private to public space. The core of the research was based on an autoethnographic physical theatre performance *Re/Naissance & Witness*, a piece that takes a comparative and (self)-reflexive approach exploring narratives of survival and healing from genocide and HIV and AIDS.

The study followed a practice as research (PaR) paradigm, located in the discourse of Physical Theatre. I used an interdisciplinary and contemporary creative method, taking the body as the main locus, vehicle and philosophical basis. The main source was the experience of the performance, dialogue among the audience, the audience and the performer, collected through after-performance discussions, interviews, reflections (classic and creative), workshops, conversations, group discussions, reflexive/free writing, research journals and personal diary entries. Some participants were interviewed directly after the performance, and they were approached again, some of them 6 months later, others in 12 months in what I termed “follow- up interviews and feedback”. A few people were approached only once and the timeframe served to record rich data that seems to have allowed rigorous analysis, triangulation and comparison across different periods of time.

The analysis was done in the light of the available literature, the audience’s response towards *Re/Naissance & Witness* enriched by the material excavated during a previous PaR assignment, entitled *Mapping the Memory of Genocide: A Narrative inquiry of Survival for an autobiographic physical performance*.

The overall observation is that this autoethnographic¹movement performance, Re/Naissance & Witness, served as a lens to engage in a critical reflexive analysis of a personal and collective narrative of the journey to healing, dialogue and reconciliation in the post-apartheid and genocide contexts of South Africa and Rwanda. Key ideas and learning

¹ Autobiographic

outcomes are presented as metaphors: Going back home, Border Dancing/Dancing on the Border, boundaries and structure, Decolonizing the Body, Mind and Space; Pedagogy of Beauty, Mapping positive stories from times of crisis, Journeys, and so on.

It was noted that the use of the singular term, for example translation or journey, does not seem to capture complexities underlying not only the interrogation and use of the body in the healing process, but also in the research project itself. For the purpose of the study, the body was put in a spotlight. Though for possible benefits of knowledge and healing, the body risked being objectified, used in what may be a 'pornography of imagery'.

An (auto)ethnographer, seeking to understand puts the body at the centre, separating it from the whole, to scientifically interrogate it. This may (re)create a 'traumatic rift' and further alienation. This approach may violate, instrumentalize and 'dehumanize' the body and related processes. In such case, even the reflexive 'I', should be applied with caution since it could perpetuate the fragmentation of the self in the long run, to gain some possible 'temporary gratification' in the form of 'scientific knowledge'. In my academic quest, did I re-enact the classical white anthropologist observing an 'indigenous body in its natural habitat'?

Trauma tends to cause physical, psychological, mental, spiritual and emotional dislocation. Studying the journey to healing from a seemingly dislocating perspective, the Cartesian dichotomy for instance or euro-centric thought, could itself be (re)traumatizing, perpetuating or adding layers to the internalized and ambient trauma. Therefore, engaging with a healing process, whether the intent is research, therapeutic or both, must seek to integrate all pieces of our being towards a form of wholeness that values, humanizes, centres and 'equally' places each piece to locationalities, positionalities and subjectivities that facilitate the reclamation and celebration of a 'shared humanity'².

The journey would still be lacking if it did not seek to bring back home 'the world into our body and the body into the world', and if it did not trigger a (re)'thinking' around the concepts of structure, borders and aesthetics, as potential foundations for alternative directions, and 'boundless' healing spaces that might grow beyond the 'scars of privilege and privilege of scars'. Research itself, (auto)ethnographic in particular, should be integral not an alienating part of the journeys.

² Ubuntu